



# Spaces for Creativity

A report from Creative Lives

January 2024

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**Our group will not be able to run without funding to help pay for the venue, and we may be forced to close by the end of the year. This group has been going for 9 years and it would be a shame to lose it.**

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# Executive summary

## Affordable spaces for local creative groups are at risk

- 73% of creative groups have experienced cost increases for venue hire over the last 2 years.
- One third of creative groups have been forced to move venue at least once since reconvening after the pandemic.

Local creative groups, the lifeblood of many communities, are facing a crisis. Finding affordable and accessible spaces has always been a challenge, but rising costs are pushing them to the brink. This report from Creative Lives reveals the urgent need for action:

- **Protecting existing spaces**

Creative groups deserve a right-to-be-consulted before changes to their venues, safeguarding their vital role in communities.

- **Venue partnerships**

Collaboration between creative groups and venues like arts institutions can create mutually beneficial partnerships.

- **Financial support**

Small grants can make a big difference, helping groups cover venue hire, materials, and equipment.

Without these measures, the rich tapestry of local creativity risks being lost, depriving communities of essential social connections and artistic expression. We need to ensure that everyone has a place to create, connect, and thrive.



# Introduction

**Finding appropriate and affordable spaces has always been a pressing issue for voluntary creative groups.**

Creative Lives is a registered charity established in 1991, that champions community and volunteer-led creative activity. Every two years, we conduct a large 'state of the sector' survey of creative participation - the [Big Conversation](#) - and concerns about venues always arise. We explored the issue in depth in our 2019 research report '[Common Ground: Rewilding the Garden](#)': identifying 'space' as one of the essential pillars of a robust local cultural infrastructure.

Accordingly, we have made 'Opening up more spaces for creative cultural activity' one of three priorities in our [Strategic Plan](#), and have conducted a number of projects to encourage innovative uses of spaces for creative activity, such as our campaign with Pub is the Hub: [Pubs Welcoming Creativity](#).

In late 2021, as creative groups were starting to reconvene after the restrictions of the pandemic, we [surveyed the sector about venues](#). At the time, just over half of the groups were meeting back indoors full time, but almost all were experiencing difficulties related to the venues they occupied. Groups reported considerable difficulties about finding accessible venues at a reasonable cost.

The overall message was clear: creative groups were crying out for suitable venues.

In late 2023, we conducted another survey about venues, this time in the context of ever increasing costs. We had heard concerns regarding venues from a number of creative groups across the UK and Ireland - to the point where we became concerned that ever-increasing costs might negatively impact the voluntary creative sector to such an extent, people might even be prevented from practising their creativity together. This report presents the findings from our latest survey about spaces for creativity.

# Survey responses

**The purpose of the survey was to gather evidence about the current issues facing creative groups in the UK and Ireland regarding venues for their activity.**

We received a good spread of responses from across the UK and Ireland, with 31% of responses from England, 9% from Northern Ireland, 16% from the Republic of Ireland, 22% from Scotland and 22% from Wales.

We also received responses from groups involved in a diverse range of artforms, with a large overlap from groups involved in multi-artforms, and we therefore feel that the findings are broadly representative of the voluntary creative sector.

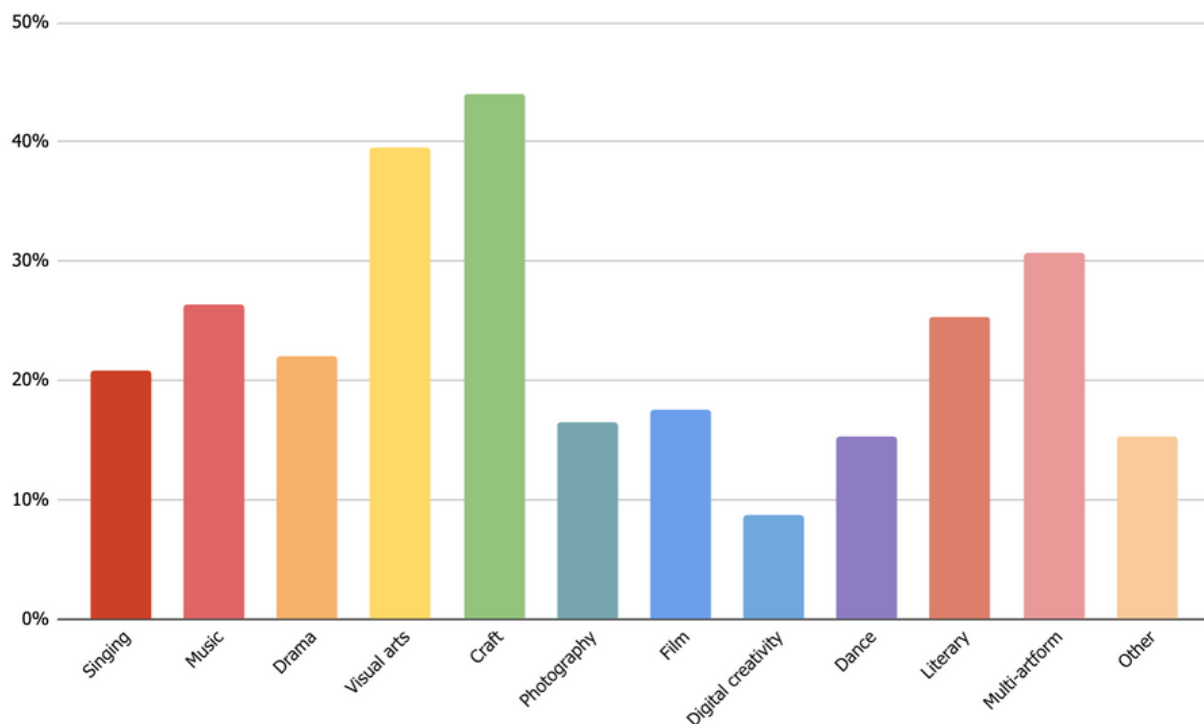


Chart 1 - Overview of respondents' creative activities

# A taxonomy of spaces

We know that the vast majority of creative groups don't own their own venues (less than 6% of respondents to this survey), and they therefore hire space from building owners in the public, private and voluntary sectors. This survey represents our first attempt to ascertain if we could develop a taxonomy of spaces used by creative groups.

Given the diversity of venues used by creative groups, we aren't surprised to find that the majority of respondents meet in venues that don't fit within the pre-specified categories of our survey, such as golf clubs, pubs, sports clubs, museums, and rented or empty shops. This variety is testament to the versatility and responsiveness of creative groups.

From the given categories, Arts Venues are the most frequently cited, by 23% of respondents, followed by Community Halls or Centres (21%), then Religious Buildings such as church halls (10%).

This diversity of venues has long been a distinctive quality of the voluntary creative sector, and is testament to the versatility of creative groups, occupying a variety of different community spaces.

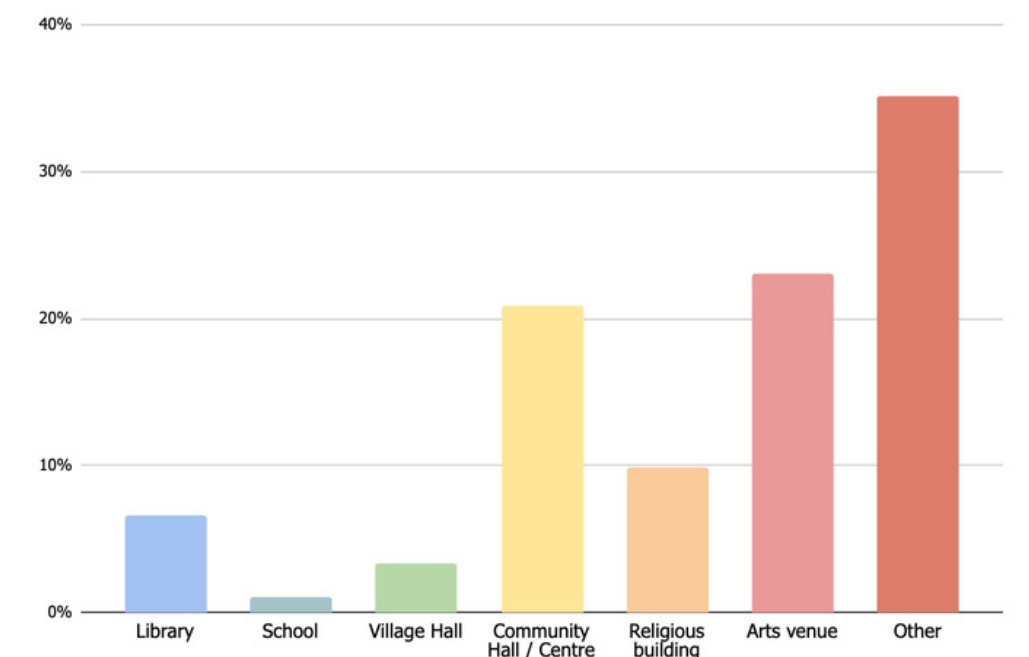


Chart 2 - Overview of respondents' current venues

# Ownership of spaces

We also asked who owns the group's venue. The answers were fairly evenly split across the public (36%), voluntary (30%) and private (23%) sectors.

Again, this is indicative of the voluntary creative sector's diversity of practice and adaptability to different circumstances. Creative Lives will be able to track significant changes in creative groups' usage of venues over time, e.g. whether there is a shift towards or away from occupancy in buildings owned by the public sector.

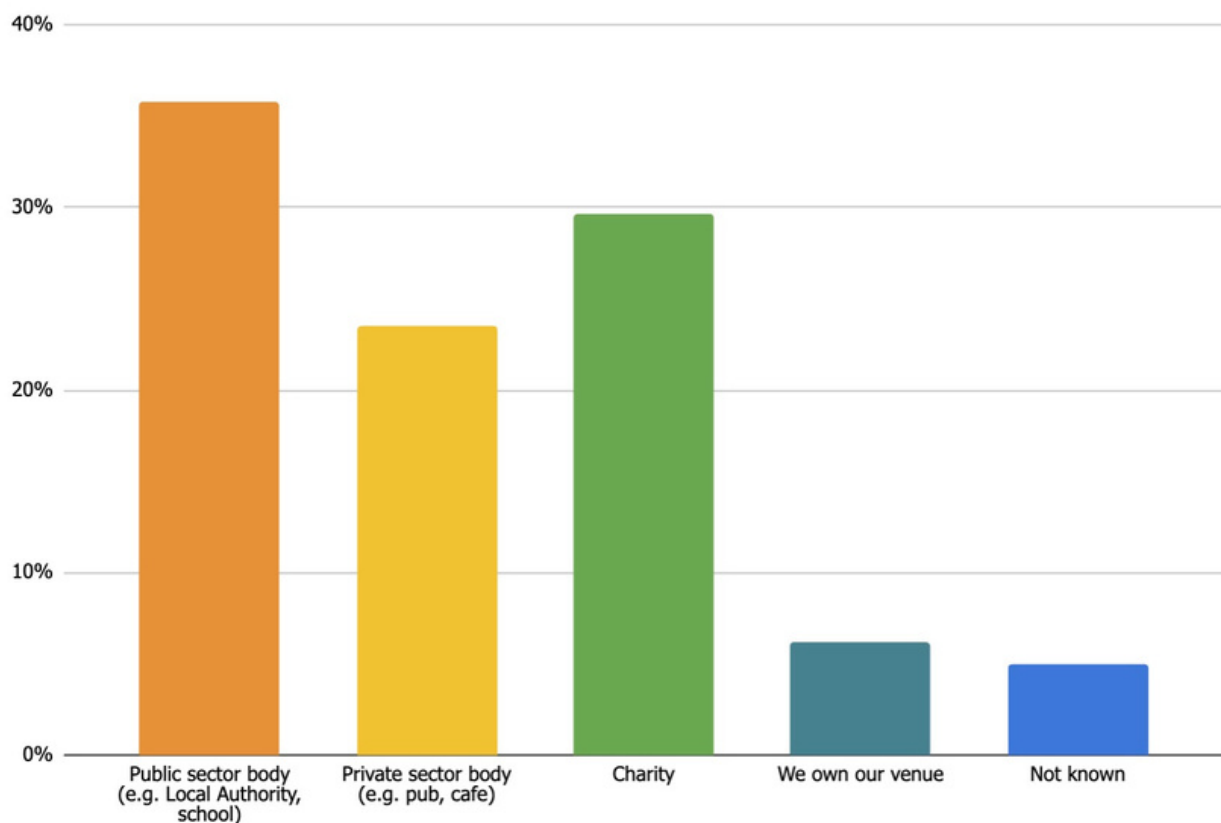


Chart 3 - Current ownership of venues



# Community Spaces Forum

**Creative Lives and Making Music have started a new initiative convening a network of national venue operators: the Community Spaces Forum.**

This forum brings together representatives of venues used by community groups to discuss the challenges groups face in finding appropriate and affordable spaces for their activities. At the same time, it looks at the challenges faced by many of the venues, and explores opportunities for everyone to work together to find solutions.

Our first meeting identified three main issues:

- the need for better match-making between groups that are looking for venues, and venues with unused space;
- the need to develop better understanding of the particular requirements of different types of community groups and different types of spaces;
- and the need to work together to influence relevant legislation and regulation.

The Community Spaces Forum meets twice a year to explore these issues.

For further information, please contact [info@makingmusic.org.uk](mailto:info@makingmusic.org.uk)



# Challenges

**“Finding an affordable, accessible venue in an appropriate location is almost impossible. We can’t store our stuff at the venues we use, so transportation is a real issue.”**

Unsurprisingly, the main challenge in finding a suitable venue is cost. The detailed responses to this issue are set out below.

We also heard that finding venues with suitable storage is particularly difficult. Accessibility is also a frequently-cited difficulty: both in terms of physically accessing the venue, but also getting to the space, public transport and sufficient parking being particular issues. Finding venues with flexible opening times is also mentioned as difficult by 41% of respondents, and requirements for changing when rehearsing for a performance.

Clearly, these issues are related: lack of storage facilities requires nearby parking or good public transport routes to bring equipment and materials to the venue.

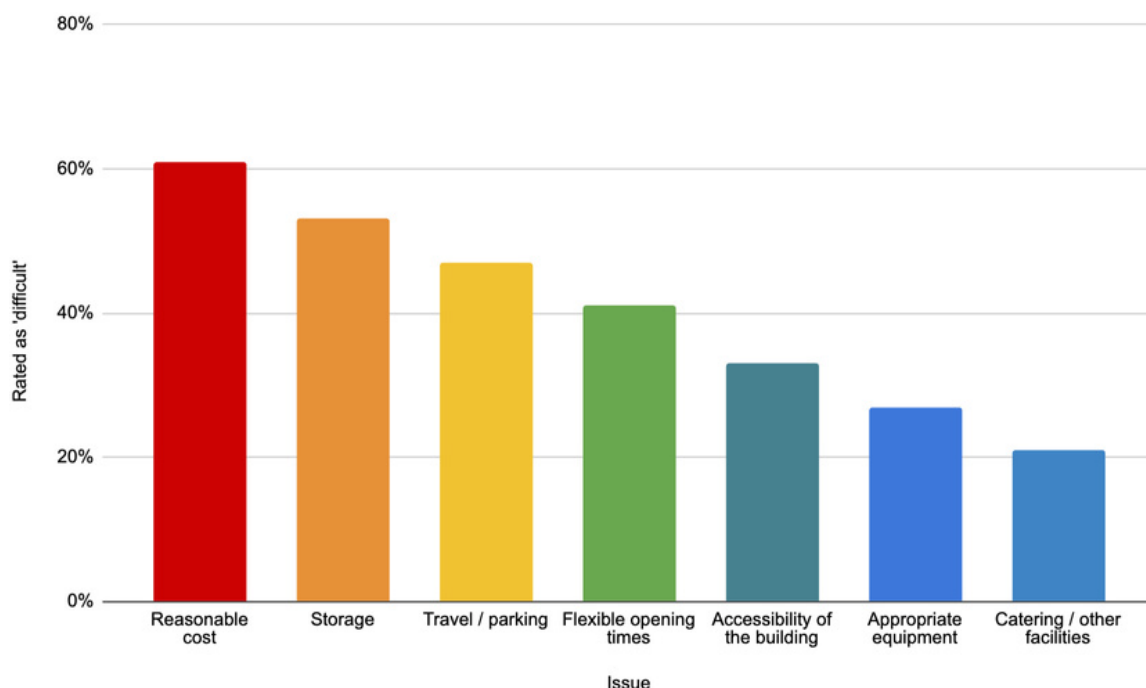


Chart 4 - Challenges rated as 'difficult' in finding suitable venues



# Increased costs

“The rising costs are limiting people who want to attend but can’t due to travel costs.”

We asked groups for the approximate hourly hire cost they currently pay. A third of respondents stated that they used their venues for free, which will provide a useful baseline for future research if costs continue to escalate. Interestingly, there doesn’t appear to be a preponderance of one particular artform that benefits from free venues, nor are the free venues more prevalent in one sector.

The second most common hire cost (at 30%) is between £10 and £20 per hour (roughly equivalent to €12-23), and it’s worth noting that this data comes from inner city, suburban and remote rural venues from across the UK and Ireland. 12% of groups are paying more than £30 per hour (around €35).

Over half of total respondents (55%) reported that their hire costs have increased over the last 2 years. But if we remove those whose venues are currently free (33%), then this figure goes up to 73%. It seems that a significant majority of groups who are paying for venue hire have seen increased costs in the last two years. Additionally, other groups reported that their costs are about to increase, pointing to a precarious position for many: “The main risk for us is being asked to move out at short notice.”





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**I don't want to put up prices because people are struggling. Funding is more difficult to obtain for projects that are more about longevity than numbers.**

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In addition to venue hire rates, groups are reporting increased costs across multiple areas:

- Utilities, particularly heating
- Food and drinks
- Materials
- Freelance fees, e.g facilitators, visiting artists / musicians
- Insurance

And many groups noted that people have less disposable income, making participation increasingly difficult: “We have a small grant to pay for art materials. Without this, many of our members would struggle to participate.” In recognition of this, many group leaders are reluctant to raise costs: “It can be difficult to maintain numbers, as even a small increase in cost means participants who face other budget priorities stop attending.”

Since reconvening in person after the disruption of the pandemic, one third of groups have moved venues again - indicating a significant amount of movement among creative groups and venues. While we know that many groups are adaptable and resilient, this can be incredibly disruptive for some participants, e.g. having to learn new transport routes, or losing connections with people in the previous building.

# Conclusion and recommendations



**We can't meet as often as we would like due to the rising costs.**



The extensive benefits arising from communal participation in creative activities are well documented, including improved physical and mental health, opportunities for social connection, and skills development. Local creative groups, therefore, directly contribute to many aspects of public service policy, from tackling loneliness and social isolation, through specific health interventions like falls prevention or supporting people with mental health problems, to regenerating communities.

But despite their profound impact, these groups are often under-acknowledged and do not feature on official surveys or databases, partly because their activity is often unfunded, amateur, everyday creativity.

The cost-of-living crisis has intensified interest in local cultural provision. As costs increase for everyone, participation in local creative groups becomes more important than ever, as it is often the one activity you can afford to do. Creative activities in 'warm spaces' such as public libraries is just one, current example.

As evidenced by the responses to this survey, the outlook for a thriving voluntary creative sector is increasingly precarious. Without suitable, affordable spaces to meet, creative groups cannot survive and flourish, and their contributions to the civic and cultural life of our communities will be curtailed.

In a fragile and fractious society, struggling with pandemic recovery and the cost of living crisis, we need to ensure that there are still local spaces where people can come together around shared interests, make friends, have fun, and find opportunities to express themselves.



## **1 - Accessible, appropriate spaces for all**

### **Finding**

Public policy decisions that impact the availability and accessibility of spaces for local creative groups can have profound consequences for the cultural vibrancy of communities and the wellbeing of their residents. We have seen instances where beloved venues, once hubs of creativity and inspiration, have become inaccessible due to unforeseen changes, leaving groups struggling to maintain their activities and disrupting the cultural fabric of their communities.

### **Recommendation**

To safeguard the continued vitality of these spaces and the groups they serve, we recommend that decision-makers prioritise the needs of these part-time occupants during any renovations or repurposing efforts. This might usefully take the form of a right-to-be-consulted, or a creative impact assessment. By ensuring accessibility and providing adequate storage facilities, we can empower these groups to continue enriching their communities and fostering creativity among their members.

### **Action**

Creative Lives will work with Making Music through our newly-formed Community Spaces Forum to implement a right-to-be-consulted for creative groups when faced with any changes to their venue. We will also raise this issue directly with governments through our advocacy work.

## **2 - Collaborations between creative groups and venues**

### **Finding**

We want to see more imaginative use of under-used spaces, transforming them into thriving hubs for local creativity. Although the vast majority of creative groups have little or no interest in owning or co-owning their own venues, many would gladly embrace the opportunity to access these spaces, particularly during quieter times. This move serves a dual purpose: it breathes new life into underused venues, infusing them with creativity, while simultaneously expanding their customer base and attracting a wider audience.

### **Recommendation**

Venues, particularly arts institutions, should embrace this opportunity to collaborate with local creative groups, fostering a mutually beneficial partnership. Such a relationship would extend beyond venue hire, encompassing a suite of support services, including financial assistance, insurance coverage, and effective promotion. Local creative groups, with their deep-rooted connections to communities, offer a valuable bridge for professional arts institutions to engage with their audiences on a deeper level.

### **Action**

Creative Lives will work to connect creative groups with under-used spaces. In our Creative Citizens projects, we are actively seeking out under-used spaces, linking with local networks, and sharing these stories as models for others to adopt.



### **3 - Micro-grants to safeguard local creativity**

#### **Finding**

We know that creative groups are resilient and operate at a very low cost, often without any public subsidy. But it is clear from respondents to our survey that with ever-increasing costs, some groups are reaching breaking point. In this situation, even small grants can make a huge difference.

#### **Recommendation**

To mitigate this crisis and safeguard the future of local creativity, we urge Local Authorities and charitable funders to extend a lifeline by providing very small grants to these groups, with proportionately light-touch application and monitoring processes. In the current economic climate, a small grant of £200-£300 / €250-€350 to help with venue hire, materials, equipment or freelance fees, can make the difference between a creative group closing or continuing. By providing targeted financial assistance, we nurture the seeds of creativity, fostering a thriving cultural landscape that benefits individuals and communities alike.

#### **Action**

In addition to advocating for micro-grants for creative groups, Creative Lives will also encourage the use of micro-grants to incentivise venues to open their doors to creative groups and activities.



**Creative Lives is a registered charity established in 1991, that champions community and volunteer-led creative activity. We work to improve opportunities for everyone to be creative and, in particular, celebrate and promote people expressing themselves creatively with others, recognising the benefits this brings to both individuals and communities.**

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